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AUTHOR Shapiro, Phyllis P.; Shapiro, Bernard J.
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ABSTRACT

The effect of teaching poetry writing on (1) attitudes toward literature, and (2) the ability to write prose was studied in four fourth-grade classes of a metropolitan elementary school (42 boys and 40 girls) from working-class backgrounds. The children were randomly assigned, two to the experimental and two to the control group. A program for teaching poetry writing was used in the experimental group, 15 half-hour lessons being given over the six-week treatment period. The control group continued with the standard fourth-grade language arts program, changed only to prove them with the same number of writing opportunities. Analysis of the data suggests that the introduction of instruction in poetry into the curriculum has beneficial side effects in terms of the subjects' ability to write prose and their more positive attitude to literature in general. Important factors contributing to these results are seen to be: (1) the inherent qualities of poetry in terms of the unconventional freedom and scope it provides for linguistic expression, and (2) the general provision for the young school child of an alternative mode for self-expression through language. (Author/DB)

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SUMMARY

Poetry Instruction: Its Effect on Attitudes Toward Literature and the Ability to Write Prose

Phyllis P. Shapiro
Emmanuel College

Bernard J. Shapiro
Boston University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

Previous research (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1971; in press) has indicated that elementary school children from both middle and lower class backgrounds and with varying degrees of intelligence, creativity, and language achievement could be taught to express themselves poetically. The present study was undertaken to investigate the effect of such instruction on (i) attitudes toward literature, and (ii) the ability to write prose.

Procedures

S's were the 82 children (42 boys, 40 girls) in the four fourth grade classes of a metropolitan elementary school, virtually all of the children being from working class backgrounds as defined by Mayer (1955); that is, their parents were skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled manual workers. Classes were randomly assigned, two to the experimental and two to the control group.

In the experimental group, a program for teaching poetry writing to children (cf. Shapiro & Shapiro, 1971) was used, fifteen half-hour lessons being given over the six-week treatment period. The control group continued with the standard fourth grade language arts program which was changed only to provide these S's with the same number of writing opportunities as those in the experimental group.

TE 002 845

The relative effects of the treatments were assessed in terms of three dependent variables: (i) the ability to write poetry as measured by a previously developed rating scale (Shapiro, Crosley, & Shapiro, 1969); (ii) the ability to write prose as measured by a rating scale adapted by the present investigators from Greene & Petty (1971) and Knapp (1968) and which yielded an inter-judge reliability of +.84 for the average rating of three judges; and (iii) attitudes towards literature as measured by the semantic differential rating of three concepts (reading, writing a story, and poetry) along four bi-polar scales selected for their high loadings on the evaluative factor (Osgood, 1964) and yielding a test-retest reliability of +.79.

Results

A. Within Groups

Within the control group, statistically significant pretest-posttest gains were made in writing ability; along a twenty-point scale this gain was 1.2 and 2.0 points respectively for the ability to write poetry and prose. No significant change was noted between the pretest and posttest means for the individual or overall attitude scales, there, in fact, being a slight decline (or worsening attitude) in each case.

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Within the experimental group, there were statistically significant gains (at the percent level) between the pretest and posttest means on all measured dimensions. On the twenty-point writing scales, the mean gain was 10.1 points for poetry and 8.7 for prose. There were smaller but still substantial (i.e., 4 to 5 points) mean gains on the attitudinal dimensions.

B. Between Groups

Since intact groups were assigned to treatments, pre-experimental sampling equivalence could not be assumed, and, therefore, analyses of covariance were used to asses the relative effect of the treatment as between the control and experimental groups. Two-way analyses were completed, assessing the main and interaction effects of treatment and sex and adjusting the posttest scores for pre-experimental differences in the corresponding pretest, IQ, reading achievement, language achievement, and literary attitudes.

These analyses revealed a statistically significant (alpha = .01) treatment effect favoring the experimental group both on the two writing scales (i.e., poetry and prose) and on the four attitudinal scales (i.e., attitudes towards reading, writing a story, poetry, and overall). There were no statistically significant differences between the sexes save for the attitude toward poetry scale on which the girls responded more favorably than the boys. There were no statistically significant interactions.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study among which are (a) its restriction to a small number of intact groups, and (b) possible questions concerning the validity of the attitude scales, the data suggest that for fourth grade S;s from working class backgrounds, the introduction of instruction in poetry into the language arts curriculum has beneficial side effects in terms of the S's ability to write prose and their more positive attitude to literature in general. Although it is true that simple practice provided writing gains in both poetry and prose for the control group, these were unsubstantial when compared to those of the experimental S's, and further, the attitudes of the control subjects were either stationary or worsening while those of the experimental group showed a marked improvement.

Seen as important in the results favoring the experimental group were two factors: (a) the inherent qualities of poetry in terms of the unconventional freedom and scope it provides for linguistic expression, and (b) the general provision for the young school child of an alternative mode for self expression through language.

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